

Elko's Cowboy Poetry Gathering Brings Wild Frontier to Life



Cowboy poets and folklorists came from all over the West to first national cowboy poetry gathering held recently in Elko.

National Event Attracts Hundreds of Spectators

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"traditional" cowboys, in that they wear jeans tucked into elaborate boots with high riding heels, silky pastel neck scarves, enormous hats that look like "20 gallons," instead of "10 gallons," and swirly, waxed, "Yosemite Sam-style" mustaches.

"The reason we have such fancy mustaches is because the rest of our clothing is so, well, *practical*."

**Story By
Cathy Free**

**Photos By
Paul Fraughton**

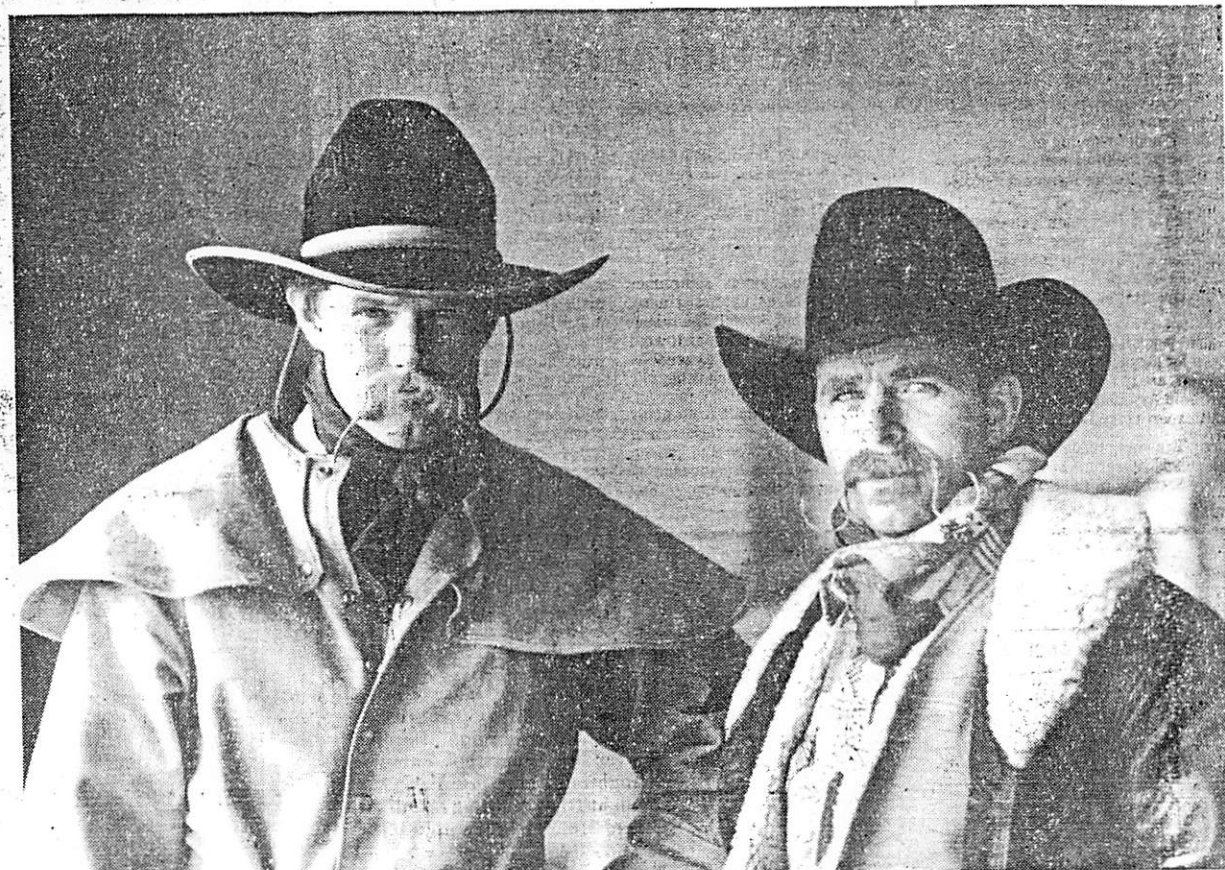
said Waddie Mitchell, a buckaroo from Elko, as he adjusted his hot-pink neck scarf. "My mustache is a personality outlet." Mr. Mitchell, and another buckaroo, Nyle Henderson, from Hotchkiss, Colo., recently read some of their poetry on Johnny Carson's Tonight Show. At the poetry gathering, Mr. Henderson did back flips on the podium to

Now, *that's* original. It's a stanza from a poem called "Old Cowboys Never Die," by 79-year-old Everett Brisendine of Chino Valley, Ariz. "I'm a good, old-time cowboy," he said, "but once in a while, I'm bad if I feel like it. Old cowboys really don't die. They just keep on a ridin' and a ropin'. At least, I hope they do."

Georgie Sicking, a 63-year-old ranch woman from Fallon, Nev., recited poems about life as a "cowboy woman." At age two, Ms. Sicking started riding horses, and at age 16 she was on the payroll as a cowboy at the Green Cattle Company in Seligman, Ariz.

"All my life, I've been working alongside men, roping wild cattle, mending fences, packing salt to the range on mules, and doctoring wormy cattle," she said. "Now, I've got my own little ranch, but I still work for a cattle company during the winter. I started writing poetry at age 17, when I'd get lonely in the wilderness on roundups."

One of Ms. Sicking's poems, "To Be a Top Hand," tells of the hard work she went through to be accepted by other cowboys as an



Buckaroo poets, Waddie Mitchell, left, and Nyle Henderson, say their swirly moustaches are their only "personal-

ity outlet" because they have to wear "practical" clothing like elaborate cowboy boots and silky, pastel neck scarves.



Cowboy poets line up at

Hundreds Attend Poetry Gathering in Elko

Cowboy Poets Take Craft Very Seriously

They arrived with mustache wax and notebooks.

These writers of the West:

To read their cowboy poetry, swap tall tales, and drink with zest.

For only cowboy poets know how to rhyme 'corn' with 'barn'.

And until they started singing, it appeared they could do no harm.

To some, these Shakespearean cowpokes seemed a little strange:

When they started singing, "Get off the cookstove, Grandma,

You're too old to ride the range . . ."

By Cathy Free
Tribune Staff Writer

ELKO, Nev. — It all started when the last cowboy tipped his hat, and climbed aboard the train. As soon as the Amtrak was out of the Salt Lake City station, heading for the first national Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, television cameras and journalists began circling the cowboys and folklorists in the bar car like a pack of wolves, and the poetry began. Keats would have been impressed. Well, after a few beers he would have been impressed.

"Smile, Rube, you're on the tube!" hollered Vern Mortensen, a cowboy poet from Parowan, Utah, who didn't think twice about propping his boots on his wife's lap. "Get out your geetars and sing about Sue — she's long legged, busty, and a cow woman, too."

Jim Griffith, director of the Southwest Folklore Center at the University of Arizona, leaned against a window with his guitar, and led a group of folklorists in singing. "Please, Mr. Conductor, put me off the train . . . I don't want to live in pain no more."

Embarrassed by Cameras

He was embarrassed when the television cameras zoomed in, mistaking him for a cowboy instead of a person who studies cowboys. The fact that the "real" cowboys didn't even know the words to all the prairie songs he and the folklorists were singing — they were busy playing poker or discussing cattle feed — made it even more embarrassing.

Such is the spirit of cowboy poetry. According to the cowboys on the train, most of them don't know the words to songs written about

them, and they laugh at the exaggerated Hollywood cowboy image beamed over the airwaves. But, give a cowboy a sheet of paper and a pencil and tell him to write a poem about his life, and the laughter stops. "Yes, ma'am," the buckaroos say, "cowboy poetry is serious business."

At least, it was in Elko.

The wild frontier came to life once again at the first cowboy poetry get-together, held recently in the town of 8,758 people, five brothels, and three gambling halls. Elko claims to be the "last real cow town in the West," so it was an appropriate place for 100 cowboys and cowgirls to read the poetry they'd written on the range and tucked away in dresser drawers and saddle bags, without a thought about becoming celebrities for a weekend.

The poetry gathering was the result of three years' planning by folklorists, state historians and the Institute of the American West to "preserve the 100-year tradition of cowboy poetry." Over \$50,000 was used to round up the talent, and in all, the event cost \$150,000, nearly one-third of which was supplied by the National Endowment for the Arts.

'Probably Try It Again'

"I didn't know what to expect when we started putting this event together," said Hal Cannon, director of the gathering. "But, it turned out so well that we will probably try it again, someday. I was especially impressed with the stage performances of the cowboys when they got up to recite their poems. They were certainly a lively bunch of cow people."

It wasn't difficult to tell the "real" cowboys and cowgirls from



—Tribune Staff Photo by Paul Fraughton

Utah cowboy poets, front, Ray Lashley, and back, from left, Vern Mortensen, Yula Sue Whipple Hunting, and Buck Crofts.

the 300 spectators and scholars who dressed up in western garb to attend the gathering. Mud, and manure-caked cowboy boots, don't lie.

Most of the cowboy poets could be placed in two categories: those

who wore simple cowboy gear — flannel shirts, jeans, belts embossed with their names, and perhaps a bandana or two; and those who call themselves buckaroos.

Buckaroos are different than See Page B-3, Column 1

Paul Fraughton

said Waddie Mitchell, a buckaroo from Elko, as he adjusted his hot-pink neck scarf. "My mustache is a personality outlet." Mr. Mitchell, and another buckaroo, Nyle Henderson, from Hotchkiss, Colo., recently read some of their poetry on Johnny Carson's Tonight Show. At the poetry gathering, Mr. Henderson did back flips on the podium to get the audience's attention.

Poetry themes at the gathering ranged from life on the range, to how to raise the perfect pig, to what it's like to get bucked off a wild horse. Other popular poems were about delivering calves and colts, eating chuck-wagon food, and getting a good cup of coffee from a good looking waitress in a great little diner.

All of the poems read at the gathering had one common quality: they trotted along in the same sing-song, rhyming fashion.

As one folklorist explained: "Cowboys use typewriters made for cowboy poetry. When the bell rings, they know they've got four more spaces to make up a rhyme."

All of the poets who attended the three-day conference confessed that they didn't think anybody would ever think their scribbling was important. "I thought I was the only one who did this," said Bill Black, a cowboy from Adel, Ore. "I started writing poetry to impress the girls, and they all left me so I didn't think I was very good. Poetry is supposed to be sissy stuff; cowboys are supposed to be macho men. I don't understand why we all write poetry."

Buck Crofts, a Utah poet from

mending fences, packing salt to the range on mules, and doctoring wormy cattle," she said. "Now, I've got my own little ranch, but I still work for a cattle company during the winter. I started writing poetry at age 17, when I'd get lonely in the wilderness on roundups."

One of Ms. Sickings' poems, "To Be a Top Hand," tells of the hard work she went through to be accepted by other cowboys as an equal.

*I just about broke my neck
tryin' to be and do
All those things a good cowboy
just naturally knew
Since that day I've handled
lots of cattle
And ridden many a mile
And I figure I'm doin' my share
if I get
in the way just once in awhile.*

Guy Logsdon of Tulsa, Okla., who claims to have the largest collection of dirty cowboy poetry around, said the image of the cowboy was "blown all to hell" at the gathering. "Ain't cowboys supposed to be rough and tough and ready to spit tobacco at a moment's notice?" he asked when it was his turn to speak on the last day of the gathering. "Ain't poets supposed to be sissies? The cowboy is supposed to be the epitome of American manhood, and here we all sit, reading poetry to one another."

The three-day event was such a success that Mr. Cannon said a book will be published in few months by Peregrine Smith Publishing, containing the best of the poetry read at the gathering. A collection of poems by Utah cowboys will also be published in a few weeks and sold locally, according

Cowboy poets line up at Elko convention center. They came from 16 states.



One of the older poets was Vern Mortensen, Parowan.



THE COWBOY'S PRAYER

O, Lord I've never lived where
churches grow,
I love creation better where it
stood
The day you finished it so long
ago,
And looked upon your work and
called it good.

I know that others find you in
the light
That sifted down through tinted
window panes.
And that I, too, find you near
tonight
In this dim, quiet starlight, on
the plains.

I thank thee, Lord, that I am
placed so well,
That thou hast made my freedom
so complete
That I'm no slave of whistle,
clock or bell,
Or weak-eyed prisoner in walled-
up street.

Just let me live my life as I've
begun.
Give me work that's open to the
sky,
Make me a pardner with the wind
and sun,
And I'll not ask a place that's
soft and high.

Let me be easy on the man that's
down;
Make me free and generous with
all;
I'm careless, Lord, sometimes
when I'm in town,
But never let them call me mean
or small.

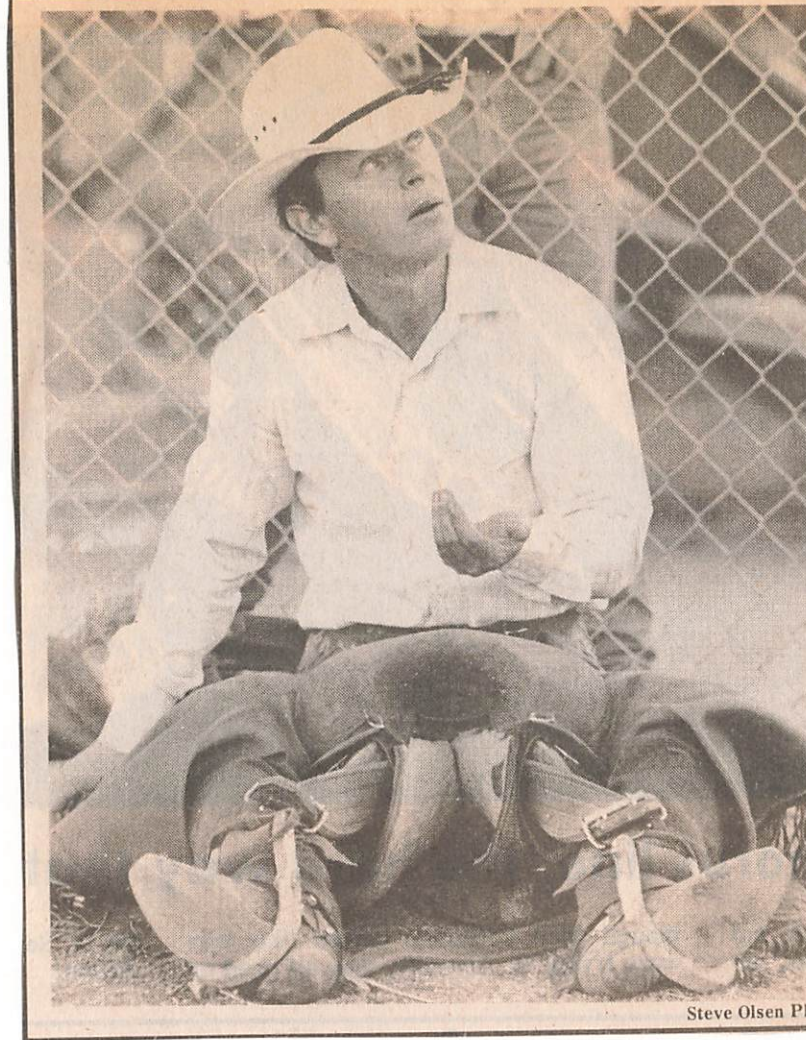
Make me big and open, like the
plains I ride,
Honest as the horse between my
knees,
Clean as the wind that blows be-
hind the raid,
Free as the hawk, which circles
the breeze.

Forgive me, Lord, when some-
times I forget.
You know the reasons which are
hid,
You know about the things which
gall and fret,
You know me better than my
mother did.

Just keep an eye on all that's
said and done,
Just right me always when I turn
aside,
And guide me on the long din:
trail ahead
Which stretches upward, toward
the Great Divide.

(Unknown)

Read at the funeral service



Steve Olsen Photo

'Ride 'em cowboy!'

23-24 July 1987

Fiesta Days in Spanish Fork heads into its final hours today. The final Fiesta Days Rodeo performance begins at 8 o'clock this evening. Before the rodeo at the renovated Utah County Fairgrounds rodeo arena, there will be a 30-minute "Aerobics" show by a stunt pilot in a biplane. The Growney Brothers Rodeo Company of Red Bluff, Calif., is producing this year's rodeo, bringing in top livestock and attracting some of the best cowboys in the country. Other Fiesta Days activities going on today include a clogging festival at the fairgrounds pavillion that began at 10 a.m. but runs until dark, the Fiesta Days Flower Show from 11 a.m.-6 p.m. at the city offices along with a quilt show, same time, same place. There is also a performance of "The Music Man" at Spanish Fork High School starting at 8 p.m.